A Cooperative Enquiry into the facilitation of online video calls

29th June 2020

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Introduction

In May 2020, during the coronavirus outbreak, and with various degrees of lockdown in operation across the world, the Association of Facilitators (AoF) hosted a 90-minute cooperative enquiry session, using web-based video conferencing tool Zoom, into our experiences of facilitating meetings using video technology.

AoF is a member organisation dedicated to the training, accreditation and supervision of members. Our offering and expertise are in group work and facilitator development in a way that integrates personal, group, organisational and social development approaches.

As a research method, cooperative enquiry fits well with our approach and style, honouring as it does co-operation, shared learning, and our intent to work *with* people and not *on* people. The explicit consideration of power, group dynamics and values is a core part of our work.

Our enquiry group

Bella, Brian and Colin, representing AoF, appreciated the enthusiasm for enquiry from a small group of our members (9 women and 4 men, primarily UK-based). Brian and Bella are co-founders of the AoF and lead the Foundations Programme; Colin is a co-facilitator on the Foundations Programme. All of the members are (or have been) accredited as facilitators with the AoF via either a self-and-peer assessment or accreditation of their prior learning, and all are experienced at working with and leading groups.

Along with Bella, Brian and Colin, our group included:
- a professional coach, working with Diversity and Inclusion, previously in an academic professorship
- a clinical and a values-based skills sales trainer working in a medical devices company
- an internal consultant and leadership development practitioner working within a high street retailer
- a higher education professional working internationally at the interface between academic research and public policy making

- an executive coach and master trainer originally from Canada, working with corporate clients in Japan for over 30 years
- a facilitator of men and boys' group work, offering training and development in emotional well-being, body psychotherapy, Process Oriented Psychology, domestic abuse perpetrator work, radical ritual and men's work
- a Programme Manager and Chartered Meteorologist, recently freelance, working primarily in the field of International Development in East Africa and beyond
- a recently freelance consultant, with deep experience of working within a high-street retailer to support statutory consultations, meetings between employees and senior leaders and restructuring
- a multilingual facilitator with experience of managing international conferences as well as running online language workshops and tuition for children and adults

From a geographical perspective, we note more participants in recent AoF calls from Europe and the Far East.

A copy of the email introducing the session and contracting for our work together is provided in the appendix. In brief, the three groups/lines of enquiry were,

1. *What are the relational concerns? i.e. personal contact, presence, rapport, etc. And how do you manage this dimension?*
2. *What does contracting look like in this environment? What are the ethical considerations? E.g. self-care.*
3. *What are the personal 'stretch points' when facilitating online? How have you adapted as a facilitator?*

A summary of each group's findings is below, followed by some additional notes and resources.

Group 1 (Presence)

1. We recognised that we were at an early stage of finding our way, and were feeling that there was 'lots missing' in terms of presence in the online group environment compared to sharing a physical space, reading social cues* and working in and from familiar environments.
   a. We missed familiar and 'low key' ways of engaging with and tuning into the group – looking around, eye contact, a felt-sense, warmth.
   b. We discussed some Zoom tools aiming to signal one's presence within the group and make nuanced contact, e.g.
      i. Hand, face or online gestures (such as an online thumbs up/wave) - these were felt to be unsubtle and needed a common group understanding and

willingness to use cohesively, otherwise become another tool for misunderstanding, exclusion, or fearing/feeling of ridicule ("Zoom Fear")

    ii. Chat - we were unsure of how to best contract in relation to this – the effect could be anywhere on the scale from subversive/disruptive to bonding/building*.

2. Our sense was that it was more possible to engage well 1:1, with small groups or with an existing and well-functioning team. A solid sense of presence or connection with new people or large groups was more difficult to achieve/trust*, and yet throughout organisations, new teams have been "thrown together". One group member described having very good meetings with her team of 11; they already had a good and positive relationship(s), and this continued into the online environment.

3. Our ability to be 'fully present' was not just challenged by the lack of the old physical space, but also by what was pressing in and demanding attention from the new domestic space – children, choice of background, doorbell ringing, etc.

4. We noted that setting up new developmental and learning groups felt particularly difficult, as opposed to task-focused, technical training, decision-making or established team meetings. In this environment, people need to meet, bond, develop a way to contribute, learn to read each other*. As the facilitator seeking to guide this, it becomes difficult to time one's interventions. We "needed more facilitation" and "clear roles" in an online environment. It was difficult to use a range of facilitation styles, particularly the more gentle and subtle ones, or to confront behaviour, in a way that we know supports personal development and deep enquiry into roles, identity, values and participation.

5. The value of checking in and contracting was recognised, but how could we do this in large groups while keeping focused and without taking up too much time?

6. We noted greater felt vulnerability and self- doubt* as the facilitator in this new environment through distance and technology. Am I monopolising? Should I step-in? How is everybody? Should I raise this issue or is it a red herring? Why are people quiet?

7. We noted that silence, while having varied qualities, a subtle energy and a myriad of meanings in the physical environment, in the online environment usually felt simply like waiting and was mostly uncomfortable. One of our group described how he missed touch and "feeling the group feeling through my skin".

8. We observed how, in various experience cycles, we were beginning/emerging from under the surface: Sensation in Gestalt Cycle of Experience, Forming/Winter ground in Tuckman's/Heron's Group Stages model, Experience in Kolb et al, Early Contracting in Group Process

9. Following our discussion of physical senses, one of our group said she preferred meetings without video as she could tune in through her ears. We decided to experiment with this. Once cameras were switched off, one group member noted that she now found it very difficult to follow the conversation. Others found the disconnection from the visual element felt more comfortable, easing pressure to

‘perform’. We were mid-experiment when our breakout room counted down our final minute before we were automatically zoomed back to the main room…

* Post-enquiry note related to presence:

Relational challenges and ‘personal edges’ raised in the context of this online meeting enquiry, such as those marked with * above are also raised in the physical group environment. These arise as explicit assessment (self/peer) of one’s performance and/or one’s self-talk, e.g. “How am I doing?”, “How am I with you?” “Am I reading your reactions accurately”, “How authentic can I be in your presence?”. “Am I on my learning edge?”

The availability of a sidebar chat feature as well as the main window felt like a new and exciting possibility for several participants – with the whole group sharing what is ‘below the surface’ while working ‘above the line’. While the chat text does not reproduce the ‘felt sense’ or the holistic experience of being physically with a group, this function adds a channel to the ‘2D’ online world where body language and shared presence are largely missing.

Group 2 (Contracting and Ethics)

1. A key question arose concerning the use of cameras. This came from recent experiences in a commercial context where some participants choose not to turn on their video. This makes it difficult for the facilitator to be sure that the participant is really ‘attending’ the meeting/training.
   a. The belief/concern is that such participants may be doing ‘other work’ whilst in the meeting. This is similar to the face to face problem of laptops/phones being used in meetings, though the rules are different as devices are required when online. It can be less obvious what people are doing online – people can be staring at their cameras but with their photoalbum open on their screen (such behaviour had been reported when sitting through long meetings).
   b. We compared this with the productivity and attention span issues that arise when multi-tasking. I.e. many applications open on the desktop and each vying for attention.
   c. We considered contracting needs to be hierarchical, clear, and up-front. But wondered if it is right to ‘require’ all camera to be on. There are competing principles/values;
      i. Ethical consideration for those who may feel insecure in front of the camera, or indeed have things going on that they don’t want people to see (e.g. LGBT community not out at work but visibly out in the home – photos, posters etc, privacy of one’s personal space, others in the home)
      ii. Technical considerations, e.g of bandwidth
      iii. Stating a clear organisational requirement for cameras to be on, and for clear accountability.

d. If use of camera is required and contracted, we considered how to confront non-compliant behaviour, where participants were not visible to all, despite this having been agreed.

e. We note that In other contexts e.g. therapy, it would be more acceptable to not use the camera if preferred and may have certain advantages.

2. Helpful principle that faciliator speaks for 4 minutes and then changes the activity to prompt in participants verbal accountability, visual accountability, and kinesthetic accountability.

a. Here the word accountability relates strongly to contracting

3. Participants to consider the impact of their online behaviour on others, e.g. eating, scratching, yawning, coffee mugs, using phone.

4. As facilitator we are unable to set up the room virtually, as we would do physically. Need to remote manage e.g. breaks, drinks, level of engagement. Individual's home environment to have same rules as a work environment e.g. water in the room but not food, no phones, etc. – let people know that they need notebook and pen etc.

5. We recognised the need for contracting in advance of the meeting so that participants manage their environment for benefit to themselves and to other participants. This includes pre/post reading materials. We noted this will require a more hierarchical and prescriptive facilitation style.

6. We noticed that our focus on contracting, i.e. how to guide and allow flow in the meeting, steered us toward the other two group discussions and we wondered about the common themes that would emerge overall.

Post-enquiry note related to Contracting: There is definitely a variety of sessions (corporate meetings or training sessions, vs workshops and more therapeutic examples) but in all cases we thought that contracting needed to start before the session and that more pre and post work might be needed in order to keep the online session as brief as possible to avoid distraction and disengagement.

We also felt that we would be pulled towards being more prescriptive and hierarchical in our way of contracting in these situations, whereas in the 'real world' we might be more co-operative in building contracts. Although, one of the group is currently delivering a team coaching programme and the in-group contracting was built co-operatively online just as she would have been likely to do in the physical world. It is quite a small group and so size is an important factor.

We also briefly discussed ethics of recording sessions, or indeed what is captured on the whiteboards. Whilst we would get permission to do this as part of the group contract, we note that recording doesn't usually happen in the physical workshops that we run. So recording does have the potential to change the quality of the group interaction. Issues of privacy and of a recording being carried forward are ethical by nature and will affect psychological safety in the online environment.

Group 3 (Adapting as a Facilitator)

1. Need to do more preparation - self and group to set the scene - things to read, think about, be ready to discuss
2. How to bring people in - have to use verbal cues rather than visual cues - naming someone helps to bring someone in and to grasp their attention
3. Keep facilitator talk time down - lots of check in 'questions and comments'
4. Speak clearly - especially if non-English speakers; use fewer colloquialisms, jokes etc.
5. Try to maintain eye contact - may help to put something e.g. a toy above the camera to help maintain contact
6. Maximum 120 minutes - maintains focus and minimise interruptions - but maintain balance of focus on task but also having good conversations
7. Questions and answers may work best in the virtual environment, but how to establish group dynamics?
8. How to enable everyone to contribute, especially if coming from different cultures. Some participants may be less confident to speak up. [In the cooperative review of this document, we noted that this statement in itself could form a new focus for enquiry. We noted the potential for a rich exploration of how cultural norms, personal norms, status/seniority etc. would affect contribution via Zoom, and how this would be same/different in the physical environment.]
9. Stretch issues
    a. Group dynamics
    b. Technology issues - whiteboards, breakout groups or even just people dropping in/ out
    c. Maintaining eye contact - can help to have more than one facilitator
    d. Running hybrid meetings in the future when some are virtual and others are 'in the room'
10. Being online can take away some of the confidence issues - good for some people
11. Might be good to ask everyone to have their video on
12. Contracting
    a. Very different for different groups e.g. large groups how to engage (use of emoticons etc)
    b. Breaks so people know there's chance for them to get a drink etc. enabling them to focus more e.g. at start say there'll be a 5 minute comfort break half way through
13. Hold the group as capable and intelligent and with respect
14. Consider co-facilitating, especially to help bring people into the discussion
15. Consider using a moderator to keep an eye out for when people want to raise a point, or to arrange breakout rooms, moderate chat etc.
16. Sessions need to be shorter and more focused on one topic
17. Contracting - how to ensure the group are engaged for the duration
18. Speaking more clearly and in shorter bursts - precise and concise

19. Those who are shy may be more willing to speak, especially when invited to comment/ contribute
20. Learning how to read things just from voice is difficult

Conclusion

In our all-group debrief, we noticed that although we had deliberately embarked on divergent tracks, our areas of discussions and questions were convergent and our sub-group findings demonstrate much overlap. We largely found that online calls were a drain on energy, even if we were engaged in the content, and perhaps this was related to the extra level of learning we were engaged in compared to more familiar environments.

Our explicit enquiry was largely focused in the Planning and Meaning Dimensions (Heron) as we attempted to balance competing demands (see above) with what the new technology offers and what the group and context needs. In the Feeling dimension, anxieties and insecurities were surfaced and shared, and related both to our personal patterns and to the enormous shifts in the environment around us. We noted how we might both self-confront and learn from personal experience, e.g. The answer to the question "Should I use a background image?" might be answered in part by the question "How might another participant's background image impact me?".

In closing the enquiry, we (AoF) suggested that peer groups may get together to facilitate each other, practice using the technology and continue the enquiry along lines that were relevant to their contexts.

Our sense was that participants had varying relationships to the use of technology as we left the call and started the write-up. For one participant immediately after the call, Zoom meetings were described as "a second best" and "better than nothing" and the tone was to embrace these as necessary for connection, decision-making, achieving a task and learning a skill. Another participant, a few weeks later, shared observations on what the digital space brought to a group that couldn't be offered by face-face meeting, e.g.

- Scope to switch between levels of intimacy more quickly and easily, e.g. using time away from the group, break / reading time, switching between group size without the need for multiple physical breakout rooms
- The use of chat – allows for a live exploration of inner thoughts or a new line of enquiry while conversation is ongoing. "This is a really interesting aspect as I can't think of an equivalent in a face-to-face setting that allows instantaneous sharing with a group. I am looking forward to playing around with this."
- The observation that some people feel more comfortable and confident online – can it therefore open up new ways of working with diverse groups? (personality types?)

- The chance to build a group dynamic with participants from disparate geographical locations, e.g. it enriched the experience for UK-based participants working with a participant located in Japan. Normally this would not have been an option for a short face-to-face session.
- Scope to connect more personally with other participants as 'entering' their home. And activities such as ice breakers could therefore be developed to make the most of this and facilitate group development on a more personal level.

During the review process, we observed more evidence of enthusiasm for the opportunities offered by video, rather than anxieties about its limitations (or ours) or unfavourable comparisons with the physical environment. In the weeks between the enquiry and the write-up of this article, our sense is that the confidence and comfort levels for those of this group who have facilitated online meetings has hugely increased. Some impressive and impactful sessions have been facilitated by this group in the last month, from bi-lingual on-boarding programmes to 'Black Lives Matter/White Privilege' enquiries.

One co-enquirer is explicitly building a service offering using video calls and concludes "some of my own doubts and questions have been resolved, my confidence has grown and I am extremely positive about how effectively we can work online".

Our enquiries and experiences continue to evolve.

Resources

- Zoom Help Centre: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us
  The Zoom Help Centre provides a range of resources for hosts and joiners, from one-page user guides through to video tutorials and live support, for a variety of platforms from phones/tablets to PCs. [Microsoft Teams, Skype, Google Hangouts etc have similar how-to-guides for their own platforms.]

- https://i2insights.org/2020/06/16/caring-online-workshops/ (Jun 16 2020); Integration and Implementation Insights; *Outbreaks, break-outs and break-times: Creating caring online workshops.*
  This article describes the experiences of a group experimenting with how they make an online workshop more productive, engaging, fun and caring. The blog addresses the challenge of gaining consensus in a virtual space and refers to the group trialing structured decision-making processes inspired by sociocratic principles.

- http://www.tipconsortium.net/what-does-covid-19-mean-for-policy-learning-and-co-creation/ (Mar 27 2020); Transformative Innovation Policy Consortium Blog "*What does COVID-19 mean for policy learning and co-creation";* Ed Steinmuller and Victoria Shaw (Mar 27 2020)
  A re-thinking of 'business as usual', and of the here-and-now facilitation experience (presence, engagement, contracting, social cues) in the context of the 'landscape shock' of COVID-19. Useful links to tools, models and methods as well as consideration of underlying themes such as power, group dynamics and psychological safety. An excellent and concise articulation of emergent 'second order learning' (learning in which fundamental assumptions, values and identities change), as well as a practical and wide-ranging guide to further resources.

- https://medium.com/@abramgreenspoon/its-time-to-start-meeting-better-8a360dd50153 (May 4 2020) "It's time to start meeting better", Abe Greenspoon.
  This article considers both meeting design and facilitator skill and guides readers towards further resources, including a sequence of articles in the Harvard Business Review, online courses, and an offer of help from the author.

- The Sunday Times (May 17, 24, 31 2020) "We can go on meeting like this", Matthew Syed. See Appendix 2 for scan.
  A series of three articles "on how to create a high-performance culture in a virtual world". The first article describing both dysfunctional meetings, status, psychological safety, appearance, 'e-charisma' and Amazon's 'golden silence' approach to meetings.

Appendix 1

This is an extract from our email introducing the session and contracting for our work together.

The Structure: Just 90 minutes!

We have a short time together and shall need to be task focused and prompt. Although, we shall take time at the start of the meeting to introduce ourselves.

After introductions we shall work in three groups, each will have a group facilitator and use the whiteboard facility to record findings. This will be saved at the end of the session. Co-operative enquiry groups allow scope to work on different lines of enquiry (divergent), and this will likely serve us better than all working on a common line of enquiry (convergent).

The three groups/lines of enquiry are,

4. *What are the relational concerns? i.e. personal contact, presence, rapport, etc. And how do you manage this dimension?*
5. *What does contracting look like in this environment? What are the ethical considerations? E.g. self-care.*
6. *What are the personal 'stretch points' when facilitating online? How have you adapted as a facilitator?*

If time allows we shall review the findings from each group.

Task: *Please advise ahead of our meeting,*

1. *Which group you would like to participate in.*
2. *If you identify a further area for exploration*

Writing up
Bella will be leading this task and in the spirit of co-operation you are invited to participate in the writing process if you wish. We shall at least publish this on our website, and there may be other outlets that we pursue. We shall acknowledge the contribution of all participants.

What we will not examine
We don't intend to look at the technical side of things, e.g. breakout rooms, security, timers etc. These facilities will certainly be part of our conversation, but we wish to focus on how the technology affects facilitation rather than how to use the technology. We are working with the assumption that we each have a good enough working knowledge, and can view user tutorials for further support.

Confidentiality and informed consent

It is important that our enquiry is both confidential and supportive, this will help us to learn from a range of experience, those good and not so good.   Confidentiality extends to the businesses that we work for, and these we agree to hold in positive regard. The findings gathered will be used to write an article on online facilitation and this we plan to make public, each participant will have opportunity to see and comment on the final version prior to publishing. Data gathered will be in the form of concepts and facilitation practices, and may be used for similar articles/reports on group facilitation. For ethical reasons, and as this is a cooperative venture, we are keen that participants each use the finding of our enquiry to further their work as facilitators and to share the learning beyond this group.

Task: *Please advise ahead of our meeting,*

1. *That you agree to confidentiality.*
2. *That you consent to participate in the enquiry.*

Resources

Thanks to those who have already sent through links to relevant guides and articles. Do continue to forward any articles that you might have, we shall collate them all into one document and circulate them after our meeting.

Appendix 2

Matthew Syed

We can go on meeting like this

Almost everyone knows that physical meetings are dysfunctional. Indeed, it is one of the defining mysteries of the age that we spend years developing individual expertise, knowledge and insight, then take decisions in forums that make us collectively stupid.

Leigh Thompson of America's Northwestern University, perhaps the leading academic in this field, has studied thousands of meetings. How do people interact? Do decisions reflect the breadth of knowledge in the room? The evidence is as clear as it is depressing. As

Thompson puts it: "Meetings predict bad outcomes more powerfully than smoking predicts cancer."

This is particularly significant given that we are now moving into a phase, perhaps one that will last for years, where the most important decisions will be taken not in a physical environment but a virtual one. Zoom is the new meeting room. Its "gallery" view is the new normal for gazing at colleagues around a whiteboard. The chat box is the new route for getting something in under the conversational radar.

This raises vital questions for any organisation hoping to make wise

decisions: can the new environment help us overcome the dysfunctions of physical meetings, or will it exacerbate them? And more crucially, why do I feel so knackered after a virtual meeting, whether it's on Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams, or whatever else?

Perhaps a good place to start is why meetings are so inefficient in the first place. It hinges on information sharing. When a leader has a domineering personality, it can shut down communication. People don't say what they think but what they think the leader wants to hear. Avinash Kaushik, the tech entrepreneur, has coined the term Hippo: the highest-paid person's opinion. He says: "Hippos rule the world, they overrule your data, they impose their opinions on you and your company's customers, they think they know best (sometimes they do), their mere presence in a meeting prevents ideas from coming up."

This is why the term "psychological safety" has come to the fore in management research. It refers to a culture where people are not fearful of offering opinions that diverge from those of the leader. The phrase might sound jargony, but it captures an environment where perspectives are rapidly shared, discussed, rejected and augmented. Comprehensive research, not least from Google, shows that

psychological safety is a cornerstone of high performance in teams.

The good news is that virtual meetings can help to build psychological safety by flattening social hierarchies. People feel less intimidated when leaders are not in the same room. Thompson calls this the "weak-get-strong effect". Introverts are also more likely to speak up, with ideas that might have gone unnoticed.

The other piece of good news is that appearance is less significant in the virtual world. In a face-to-face meeting, a range of factors influence group dynamics, including tone and physical attractiveness. The evidence shows that a deep voice and a posh accent, spoken by a tall, well-dressed male, has a vastly more persuasive impact than a higher-pitched voice and a regional accent – even if what is said is identical.

In the virtual world, "pseudo-status markers" are less significant, elevating substance above style. Thompson puts it this way: "Physical charisma does not always translate into 'e-charisma'."

This, of course, presents a danger to those who have always relied on physical charisma to get their way, particularly if meetings involve sales pitches to clients. Such people will need to learn a new suite of skills, a new way of persuading. Indeed, all of us, in our different ways, will need to adapt to this new reality, which is why a mindset of flexibility and agility will prove a precious asset in the new world. Those who rely on what has worked historically will not last long.

But this brings us to the vexed issue of why virtual meetings are so draining. A key reason is the stress associated with people speaking at the same time, where it is difficult to hear, let alone respond. When a meeting has only four or five people, it is perhaps sensible to rely on individual discretion to decide when to step in, even if it leads to occasional confusion. In a group of 10 or more, this can be disastrous. A skilled moderator is invaluable, to drive discussion and conversational turn-taking. Functions like Zoom's "raise hand" will be crucial. Perhaps the most seminal innovation

> **People feel less intimidated when bosses aren't in the same room**

in the conduct of meetings in recent years is that pioneered by Amazon. It starts all meetings with a "golden silence": for 30 minutes, the group reads a six-page memo that summarises, in narrative form, the main agenda item. Writing in narrative form nudges the proposer away from bullet points, forcing them to think more deeply about their proposal. And reading in silence means that everyone has the space to bring their diverse ways of thinking to the discussion before it starts.

This technique translates remarkably well to virtual meetings. Reading the memo in advance of the meeting might be the price of attendance. The other crucial aspect of the Amazon method is once discussion commences, the leader speaks last. This thwarts the classic dynamic of everyone converging on the leader's perspective early on, and generates a freer, wiser discussion. This too translates into a virtual context.

What seems certain is that in a world where the most consequential decisions are made in meetings, ensuring these forums work effectively is mission critical. It is why those organisations that devote time and energy to getting this right are infinitely more likely to win.

This is the first in a series of three articles on how to create a high performance culture in a virtual world
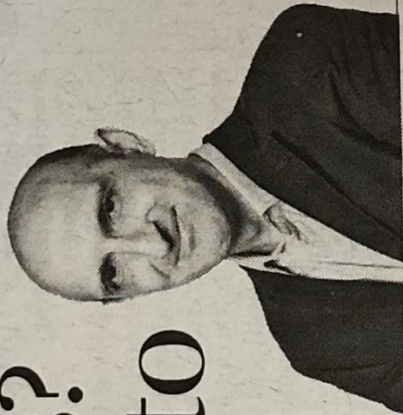*@MatthewSyed*

Matthew Syed

Out of ideas? Here's how to get creative

Alex Faickney Osborn was an ambitious American advertising executive who joined an agency after the First World War, helping it to grow into a thriving business. It wasn't until 1942 that he published the book that would make his name, and another fortune. The book was titled *How to Think Up* and was about an amazing new technique to generate ideas. He called it brainstorming.

Osborn was fascinated by the creative process, and the art of thinking more generally. He often told the story of an old man in New Hampshire who spent his days sitting in front of the general store. One day, the man was asked what he did while he sat. "I just think," he replied. When his interlocutor expressed surprise that he could spend a whole day thinking, the old man said: "Thinkin' is like sin. Them who don't do it are scared of it, but them who do it enough get to like it."

Brainstorming rapidly became the hottest creative technique in America, deployed in boardrooms, classrooms and government departments. In the following decades, it became a part of everyday discourse. Today, as we move to a virtual world where companies are communicating via Zoom and the like, the notion of generating ideas by batting them around is perhaps hotter than ever — a route to innovation in a rapidly changing world.

However, there's a problem with brainstorming: it doesn't work. Or, at the very least, it has the patchiest of track records. As early as 1958, a study at Yale showed that brainstorming was less effective than people generating ideas on their own. Earlier this year, a survey of 20,000 creative professionals from 197 countries found that a majority said brainstorming was unhelpful for solving a creative challenge. As one put it: "It is probably the most overrated creativity technique in history."

Psychologists have identified a number of defects with brainstorming, but perhaps the most fatal problem is hierarchy. The moment the most senior person suggests an idea, the rest of the group tends to converge upon it. Instead of reaching for new concepts and fresh solutions, they unconsciously become anchored. "This can suck the life out of innovation, without anyone realising it," a researcher noted.

Thankfully, there's a solution — one that is equally effective in the virtual world and the physical one. It is called brainwriting. Instead of speaking ideas out loud, you jot them down. The ideas

can be pinned on a noticeboard, physical or digital, so that others can see them, and vote on them. The key is that ideas are posted anonymously. This separates the quality of the idea from the status of the person suggesting it, creating a true meritocracy of ideas.

The group can then vote on the best ideas before getting into smaller groups to see how they can be taken to the next level, creating a dynamic process of idea improvement. In her book *Creative Conspiracy*, the psychologist Leigh Thompson notes that brainwriting not only generates a higher volume of ideas, but — more importantly — ideas that are more creative. "Brainwriting is useful before, during and following real-time virtual meetings," she says. "It is almost impossible to not get these results."

Of course, techniques for generating ideas are only one aspect of how innovation happens. Neither brainwriting nor anything else will be particularly effective if the group is too homogenous, a classic problem in organisations. Imagine a football manager trying to come up with new concepts for training, tactics and recovery, but reaching out to other coaches only from the same background and cultural milieu. There would be insufficient "cognitive diversity".

When Scott Drawer, a sports scientist, was pondering how to drum up ideas to help the British Olympic team, he approached a broad range of collaborators, including scientists and engineers from industry and universities. "It wasn't necessarily the best [group] in terms of academic expertise, but it was the best in terms of creativity, people who would listen, be curious, want to explore," he said later.

As Times sportswriter Owen Slot noted in a book he co-authored, this spawned a remarkable array of innovations: "Formula One technology to help build bobsleighs, British Aerospace technology to build the skeleton sled on which Amy Williams won gold in Vancouver . . . 'hot pants' for cyclists to wear to keep their muscles

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> **Innovation can no longer be hived off to a hub or team — it's everyone's responsibility**

warm between races . . . that coated the spray skirt of Ed McKeever's canoe in which he won gold in London".

Innovation, then, is underpinned by (at least) two conditions. First, you need a diverse group, rather than people from the same silo or background. This provides scope for divergent thinking and cross-pollination of ideas. Second, this group needs to interact in a way th[at] brings out their ideas rather than suppresses them. This is where brainwriting comes into its own, freei[ng] people from the social constraints tha[t] can inhibit the creative dynamic.

In a world changing at pace, innovation is no longer something th[at] can be hived off to an innovation hu[b]; creative team; it is the responsibility... everyone in an organisation. This is... platforms such as Slack, GitHub, H[i] Learning and Trello are set to bec[ome] part of the furniture, as familiar as... conference rooms and whiteboar[ds].

Alex Faickney Osborn was rig[ht]... one thing, though: creativity isn'[t]... much a talent as a technique. A... technique that all organisations... perfect if they hope to win.

This is the second in a series of three articles on how to create ... performance culture in a virtu[al]... @matthewsyed

...empowers the Federal Communi-

Max Ringelmann was a French engineer fascinated by the mechanics of human action. In the 1880s he conducted a famous experiment, asking his students to pull as hard as they could on a rope attached to a dynamometer. Each student pulled an average 85kg, roughly in line with Ringelmann's expectations. But then he added a twist. He placed the students into a team of seven, one behind the other, and asked them to pull again. What happened? The pull of each individual declined by 25%.

This phenomenon is seen in so many contexts that psychologists have given it a name: social loafing. It happens when people let others take the strain. The students continued to look as if they were trying, grunting and gritting their teeth, but a dynamometer doesn't lie. The total pull of the group summing the individual contributions should have been 595kg. In fact, it amounted to a mere 505kg.

Anybody who has worked in a team will recognise this phenomenon. They will have seen colleagues pretending to beaver away while taking things easy. They will also have noted how corrosive it can be when even a small minority decides to slack. As one psychologist said: "Social loafing can prove contagious because those putting in a shift start to feel like suckers."

I mention this because the dangers of social loafing are particularly stark as we move from face-to-face working to virtual teams. This is a moment when it is difficult to monitor the efforts of colleagues, so it can be tempting to free-ride on their endeavours. This is why one of the most urgent challenges facing organisations in the post-Covid age is how to inspire the discretionary effort that can represent the difference between success and failure. How to mitigate social loafing?

An intriguing answer is suggested by a study by James Baron and Michael Hannan of Stanford Business School. They analysed 200 technology start-ups in the mid-1990s, interviewing founders and tracking performance. They discovered that each company was founded according to a distinct blueprint. Some had a "financial" template, luring top talent by paying top dollar. Others had a "product" template, positioning technology as the prime motivating force. Still others were founded on "commitment", which emphasised "a family-like feeling and an intense emotional bond".

These blueprints mattered. Only 10% of the start-ups changed template, and more than 50% sustained the founding blueprint throughout the period of the study. It is also worth noting that few expected the commitment model to stand a chance; after all, the tech sector is one in permanent flux, where commitment seems to mean little.

"The commitment model was widely pronounced dead in Silicon Valley not long after we completed our first visits," the researchers wrote.

But what happened? In the event, the commitment blueprint came out way on top. Not a single one failed. The firms based on financial incentives, on the other hand, were the most likely to perish. Cash crashed. The commitment firms were stronger on other metrics, too — they were the fastest to go public, had the highest profitability ratios and tended to be leaner.

The Ringelmann experiment helps to explain these results. In hi-tech, as in most other high-value sectors, success depends on teamwork. They are "positive sum" environments. Companies that conceive of staff as individualistic, and who seek to motivate them with financial incentives alone, run the risk of people acting selfishly. Employees are more likely to free-ride on others, seek to take credit for their work and, perhaps most dangerously of all, conceal insights that might enable colleagues to get ahead of them.

Commitment cultures, on the other hand, emphasise social bonds. They create incentives based on group as well as individual performance, and spend time articulating the overarching purpose of the company, rather than merely the cash it puts into the pockets of staff. This means that they recruit a deeper suite of emotions, not least the instinct to work towards a common goal. In short, they recognise that while

humans are individualistic, we are also social animals, motivated by meaning as well as by money.

A commitment culture is about far more than a cheesy mission statement or casual talk at the beginning of a Zoom meeting to foster bonding. Rather, it is about leaders who think strategically about how to connect teammates to one another, and to a shared purpose. Medtronic, a healthcare company, ensures that all employees receive regular feedback from patients so they can see how their technologies impact lives. "When they see for the first time how much their work can matter, many employees break down into tears," the psychologist Adam Grant has written.

Steve Denning inspired a cultural shift at the World Bank by giving presentations based not merely on data, but also narrative. In particular, he shared a story of a health worker in Zambia whose life was saved by the organisation. "It was a watershed moment," one staff member said.

"It brought our work to life."

Sir Alex Ferguson, the football manager, constantly emphasised the history of Manchester United — the links between players and fans, and between each other. "It made us feel that we were part of something bigger than ourselves," David Beckham once told me. "It was inspirational."

Virtual working, where people are geographically dispersed, doesn't mean that connections matter less; they matter more. Organisations that build a sense of purpose into everything they do, and create digital forums for staff to meaningfully interact, are far more likely to mitigate social loafing and inspire deep commitment. As Vince Lombardi, the great American football coach, put it: "The challenge of every team is to build a feeling of oneness, of dependence on one another. Because the question is usually not how well each person performs, but how well they work together."

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> ## Humans are social animals, motivated by meaning as well as by money

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